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THE INEVITABLE OTHER.

REIMAGINED FUTURES AND PATTERNS OF COLONISATION

IN SHEREE R. THOMAS'S "THE GRASSDREAMING TREE"

Keywords: difference, memory, otherness, postcolonialism, science fiction

There can be little doubt that science fiction's relationship with the issue of race has been often ambiguous or even uncomfortable. As Elizabeth Anne Leonard remarks in her essay on race and ethnicity in science fiction:

By far the majority of sf deals with racial tension by ignoring it. In many books the characters' race is either not mentioned and probably assumed to be white or, if mentioned, is irrelevant to the events of the story and functions only as an additional descriptor, such as hair colour or height. Other sf assumes a world in which there has been substantial racial mingling and the characters all have ancestry of multiple races. These kinds of writing can be seen as an attempt to deal with racial issues by imagining a world where they are non-issues, where colour-blindness is the norm. (254)

The fact that mainstream science fiction has for years attempted to present the issue of race as not important or even nonexistent, despite the fact that the encounter with the Other constitutes one of the most prominent themes in the genre, owes to the origins of science fiction, deeply rooted in the colonial ideals of imperial expansion and conquest. As John Rieder (375) observes, science fiction "appeared predominantly in those countries that were involved in colonial and imperialist projects." To say, then, that science fiction is nothing more than a purely escapist phenomenon, one which looks only towards the future and completely divorced from any measure of reality, would be to disregard the explicit link between its approaches to issues such as race, gender, class, or sexuality and the colonialist legacy of the genre, which still informs those approaches to a significant extent in the mainstream cultural production.

It could be said, then, that the emergence of postcolonial speculative fiction, and science fiction in particular, serves as a counter-discursive reaction to the imperialist foundations of the genre and constitutes an attempt at the postcolonial act of writing back to the centre, thus situating itself within a larger framework of postcolonial practice. As Helen Tiffin (98) observes: "Post-colonial counter-discursive strategies involve a mapping of the dominant discourse, a reading and exposing of its underlying assumptions, and the dis/mantling of these assumptions from the cross-cultural standpoint of the imperially subjectified 'local'." And it is precisely the dismantling of the hegemonic forms of expression and the simultaneous reclamation of the silenced stories and voices which comes to the fore in the practice of postcolonial science fiction writing. Moreover, according to Michelle Reid (258), "[science fiction's] fantastic nature does not distance it from historical colonial projects, but gives a closer insight into the strategies used to create the ideological fantasy of colonialism." Therefore, science fiction, relying upon the principle of cognitive estrangement (Roberts 8), regarded by Darko Suvin as the single most significant characteristic of the genre, allows for a more complex response to the dynamics of difference and facilitates revisionist practices, in which the authors transcend the binary of the colonial discourse and write back to the hegemonic centre, creating fractured, non-homogenous narratives which capture the multiplicity of the colonial experience.

Sheree R. Thomas, in her short story "The Grassdreaming Tree," published in an anthology of contemporary postcolonial speculative fiction entitled *So Long Been Dreaming*, interrogates the hegemonic dynamics of difference in order to expose the colonial binary as insufficient in describing the colonial and postcolonial condition, and analyses the links between memory, heritage, and the postcolonial reimaginings of the future, emphasising the influence of the hegemonic discourse on the narratives produced by counter-discursive practices. Her story, set on an alien world inhabited by the descendants of people of African ancestry, focuses on the settlers' struggle with the lingering

colonial tensions and approaches the issues of identity and memory of the colonist community at the same time as it questions their precarious position as those who are at the same time struggling with their own colonial past and who become colonisers in their own right. With that in mind, the following paper seeks to explore the themes of memory, heritage, and the dynamics of difference, with the view of substantiating the thesis that the loss of ancestral heritage and collective memory enables the unwitting perpetuation of the colonial paradigm in a reimagined context, thus emphasising the pervasiveness of the colonial narrative and its continuous influence in the processes of decolonisation.

In "The Grassdreaming Tree," Thomas proposes a certain reversal of the colonial order and challenges the imperialist notion which serves as one of the milestones of contemporary mainstream science fiction, that is, the concept of the manifest destiny of the colonisation of space. By reallocating the technological power to those who had been relegated to the peripheries under the colonial rule, she argues that, contrary to the belief perpetuated by mainstream science fiction, it is not necessarily the white man's destiny to colonise the space. Therefore, by writing against the tradition of the white male hero conquering alien worlds and subjugating the natives, she exposes the inadequacy of the colonial hegemonic discourse as well as the writings it has produced and creates a more complex, nuanced narrative which addresses the issues of the multiplicity of colonial difference and positions the settlers at the intersection between the central and the peripheral, emphasising their unusual situation as both the colonisers and the former colonised.

At the same time, however, the author discusses the necessity for what could be called the inevitable Other, pointing to the pervasiveness of the colonial hegemonic paradigm and the binarist notions of the Self-Other dichotomy, which invade the new settler community with the arrival of the grasswoman, who—as a white trespasser—brings back the colonial tensions of the past and facilitates the repeated patterns of Othering in a setting where the roles have

been reversed. The grasswoman, then, becomes the locus of colonial ambiguity, at the same time exposing the inadequacy of the fixed centre-periphery division and emphasising the inherent liminality of the colonial encounter. Thus, her status as the Other, the undesirable, the inferior further complicates the colonial narrative, and her role of the bringer of forgotten stories and lost memories facilitates the discussion concerning the importance of remembrance and ancestral heritage in the process of (de)colonisation.

In her exploration of the theme of remembering and forgetting in the colonial and postcolonial practice, Thomas introduces two mutually exclusive paradigms, embodied by the two groups of characters in the story, and follows a similar reversal of the roles. Thus, the white grasswoman (and later on also Mema, the child protagonist of the story) belongs to the magical paradigm, which stands for the past and superstition, but also for remembering, while the black settlers embody the technological paradigm, which stands for the future and scientific advancement, but also for forgetting. Forgetting, then, seems to be presented initially as the necessary condition for technological progress and the possibility of resolving the trauma of the colonial past, whereas the grasswoman, whose only power resides in storytelling, is considered a relic of the past that was ruled by magic and superstition, an almost ironic mirrored image of the Magical Negro (Marvin 35). What is crucial here, though, is the fact that, ultimately, the settlers, in eschewing their ancestral heritage and following the path of scientific advancement, unwittingly inscribe themselves back into the colonial paradigm of their past, in which the distinction between the intellectual superiority of the centre and the superstitious backwardness of the periphery was used to maintain the colonial hegemony of science and progress. "And a small loss it was," the narrator says. "They had traded the soft part of themselves, their stories and songs, the fingerprints of a culture, for what deemed useful. Out went the artifacts that had once defined a people" (Thomas 112). However, what Thomas emphasises throughout the story is the devastating effect the loss of memories and ancestral past has on the settler

community. Her use of the imagery of a dying land made of hard stone points to the dying memories and traditions of the community, while the metaphor of the stone okro tree growing upside down, with roots that reach the sky, mirrors the feeling of rootlessness experienced by the members of the diaspora, distanced from their ancestral heritage they abandoned in their place of origin. *"That tree ain't got no roots,"* says Mema's father. *"Whole world made of stone, thick as your head. Couldn't grow a tree to save your life"* (Thomas 110). Thus, the fundamental disbelief of the community in anything that cannot be explained by a scientific fact is, once again, presented as an indication of the repeated pattern of colonisation they subjected themselves to by embracing the imperial hegemony of science.

Ultimately, however, even though the reimagined future of the settler community follows the technological paradigm perpetuated by the colonial discourse and eschews the magical paradigm of their ancestors, it appears that the tensions of the colonial past cannot be resolved in a simple act of forgetting one's ancestral heritage. What Thomas seems to suggest, instead, is that the burden of unresolved colonial traumas that re-emerge with the arrival of the grasswoman is impossible to leave behind. If forgetting the past, then, brings rootlessness to the diasporic community, then the arrival of the grasswoman, who symbolically lives in the stone okro tree, brings back the link to the ancestral past. She becomes, in a sense, the ultimate storyteller, the griot who preserves the past and passes on the tradition to the new generations, the ancestral repository of memory: *"They'd left their stories in that other place and now the grasshopper peddler was selling them back"* (Thomas 110). The grasswoman, then, becomes the locus of colonial ambiguity, as her role in the story can be seen as twofold. On the one hand, she is the place of remembrance, the only link to the community's forgotten past, and a source of anxiety for the settlers, as she not only brings back the stories they purposefully left behind, but also, by virtue of her very presence among the settlers, reintroduces the colonial tensions of the past and emphasises the continued presence of the

hegemonic discourse, making the colonists' ultimate failure in escaping the imperial paradigm explicit. On the other hand, the grasswoman commits an act of trespassing, as her people are not allowed on the planet at all, and yet she—knowingly or not—repeats the pattern of her ancestors: she comes, unwanted, and her presence alone brings back the old colonial order, perpetuating the narrative of encroachment of the white colonisers upon indigenous societies, disturbing the peace, and once again turning the settlers into aliens, forcing them to face their Otherness. Thomas describes this process as follows:

Such music fell strangely on the settlers' ears that bent only to hear the quickstep march of progress. In a land of pink soil as hard as earth diamonds, it was clear they held little in common with their new home. And could it be that the grasswoman's hoppers were nibbling at the settlers' sense of self, turning them into aliens in this far land they'd claimed as their own? [...] The traitors who traded her singing grasshoppers for bits of crust and crumbs of food hidden in pockets, handed with a side-long glance should have known that after all that had been given, as far as they had travelled, leaving the dying ground of one world, to let the dead bury their dead, there was no room for the old woman's bare-toed feet on their stone streets. (111)

Nonetheless, her act of defiance remains ambiguous in nature. On the one hand, she appears to control the narrative to a certain degree, as she possesses and sells back the lost stories belonging to the settlers' ancestral tradition, in an act reminiscent of the colonial practice of filtering the indigenous experience through the lens of the dominant discourse, which, through appropriation, produces false distorted narratives, fragmentary memories, and altered histories. As Thomas writes:

Not enough that her folk had stolen the other lands and sucked them dry with their dreaming, not enough that they had taken their names and knowledge and twisted them so that nobody could recall their meaning, bad enough that every tale had to be retold by them to be heard true, [...] now she had stolen their stories, the song-bits of self, and had trained grasshoppers, like side show freaks, to drum back all the memories they had tried to forget. (112)

On the other hand, remembering in the story means not only Othering, but also reconciliation with the colonial traumas and ultimately healing for the settler community, as the grasswoman's and Mema's actions attempt to bridge

the colonial past with the technological future, bringing back the forgotten ethnic identity and ancestral collective memory that the community has actively rejected, allowing the diaspora to rediscover their roots. Those attempts, however, are initially thwarted, as the settlers destroy the okro tree in the symbolic act of resistance against the shared burden of colonial history, once again abandoning the past and rewriting their future by repeating the colonial pattern of Othering and extinguishing memories (Memmi 52). Still, their actions are proven to be futile, as their collective memory ultimately seems to invade the community, their thoughts and their dreams: they dream of the spider god Anansi (Thomas 112) and remember echoes of Western fairytales (112–13), signalling that, in the end, their memory mirrors the liminal reality of the postcolonial condition, reflects its inherent hybridity.

The final act of the transition from forgetting to remembering is marked by Mema becoming the grasswoman's successor. The passage in which she symbolically becomes a new tree, replacing the destroyed stone okro tree that the grasswoman used as a shelter, marks the beginning of a new order, but it also signals the apparent generational conflict that divides the community. Nonetheless, what Thomas emphasises first and foremost is Mema's life-giving essence, bringing the community back from the dead land of stone into a new life:

The hammers crushed the ancient stone, metal teeth bit at stone bark. Inside, the girl child had unleashed a dream: her hair was turning into tiny leaves, her legs into lean timber. Her fingers dug rootlike into the stone soil. The child was in another realm, she was flesh turning into wood, wood into stone, girl child as tree, stone tree of life. (118)

Mema, as the member of the settler community, does not commit an act of transgression in becoming the carrier of ancestral knowledge and the repository of memory; instead, she is the harbinger of a new order, as she reconciles the past with the future and allows for the two paradigms—the magical and the technological—to converge, thus blurring the colonial binary of science vs. superstition. In the final passages of the story, with the departure of the settlers' children, who follow Mema in order to reclaim their past and

reconcile with the burden of the colonial traumas by embracing the multiplicity of the colonial experience that Mema-the-grasswoman embodies, Thomas comments on the necessity of remembering and the consequences of forgetting for diasporic and other postcolonial communities, and engages in a broader discussion concerning the processes of decolonisation.

She argues, therefore, that the resolution of the imperial past lies not in upholding the strict binarism of the colonial paradigm and simply reversing the allocation of power, but rather in embracing the liminal nature of the postcolonial condition. In order to leave the inevitable Other behind, it is necessary to confront the traumatic past and acknowledge the ways in which the hegemonic paradigm shaped and controlled the colonial discourse in the past, as well as the ways in which it continues to influence the contemporary postcolonial discourse. Thomas, then, by complicating the colonial dynamics of difference and engaging with the burden of the imperial past to give the voice back to the silenced colonial subject, writes back to the imperial centre, exposing the inadequacy of the hegemonic paradigm in its most fundamental assumptions and questioning the system of binary oppositions. Thus, such nuanced analysis of the way in which the remnants of colonial power relations function in the postcolonial reality, combined with an in-depth look at the links between memory, heritage and the creation and functioning of such power relations, not only contests the hegemonic master narrative, but also challenges the dominant discourse perpetuated by mainstream science fiction and critically addresses its colonial roots, allowing the genre to confront its imperial legacy and become a potent vehicle for counter-discursive practices in the postcolonial discourse.

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Abstract

The article aims at an in-depth analysis of the way in which Sheree R. Thomas, in her short story "The Grassdreaming Tree," engages in a dialogue concerning the issue of power relations and Othering practices in the postcolonial paradigm, as well as the importance of collective memory and cultural heritage in the processes of decolonisation. Using the postcolonial discourse and theory of science fiction as the primary methodological frameworks, the article seeks to explore the themes of memory, heritage, and the dynamics of difference, with the view of substantiating the thesis that the loss of ancestral heritage and collective memory enables the unwitting perpetuation of the colonial paradigm, thus emphasising the pervasiveness of the colonial narrative and its continuous influence in the processes of decolonisation.